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Why The "Harvest of Death" Doesn't Matter (And Why It Does)

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Why The "Harvest of Death" Doesn't Matter (And Why It Does)

Abstract

I went on a tour a few Sundays ago. It was very tough to explain exactly what I had done (in sensible terms) with my coworkers when I came into the office the next Monday morning. Not just very tough, but embarrassingly tough.

THEM: "What did you do this weekend, John?"

ME: "Well, Sunday I went on a tour of places on the Gettysburg battlefield where one specific photo wasn't taken."

THEM: *blank stare* [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Photography, Harvest of Death

Disciplines

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Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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Why The "Harvest of Death" Doesn't Matter (And Why It Does)

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 18, 2012

I went on a tour a few Sundays ago. It was very tough to explain exactly what I had done (in sensible terms) with my coworkers when I came into the office the next Monday morning. Not just very tough, but embarrassingly tough.

THEM: "What did you do this weekend, John?"

ME: "Well, Sunday I went on a tour of places on the Gettysburg battlefield where one specific photo wasn't taken-"

THEM: *blank stare*

That conversation really tends to go nowhere, frankly. Tim Smith and Garry Adelman [toted around 60 eager visitors as we patrolled the battlefield at Gettysburg](#), visiting the places that *aren't* where the Harvest of Death series of photographs, Alexander Gardner's enduring battlefield mystery, could have been taken. We crossed the Sherfy Farm to set foot in Mr. Spangler's fields. We stood just north of the Wentz House and squinted at Little Round Top. We wandered around behind the former Keefauver Elementary site and ended in a driving rainstorm along Reynolds' First Corp Line. And throughout the day, at stop after stop, Garry and Tim unfolded for us why the Harvest of Death could not have been taken at that place.

Much time, hot-air and many electrons have been expended on this topic of late, spurred on by a few publicly expressed theories (many of which end up being rehashes of long discounted theories). Particularly, John Cummings [over at Spotsylvania Civil War Blog](#) has been hammering relentlessly on his theory. In turn, [Garry has been urging caution](#) in publicizing new theories before they've been vetted and the author him or herself has vehemently tried to prove themselves wrong.

I spent 5 hours out on the field on Sunday, in a quest to learn about a landscape to better find a photo's true location. But in the end, it doesn't matter at all.



Garry posing a stand-in at a place where the photos were *not* taken.

I'll repeat that and emphasize it: the actual location of the Harvest of Death and the other photos taken nearby ***does not matter at all.***



He had eyes and a nose.
He had loves and sorrows and joys...

It might be nice to know. Garry expressed as much during the tour. He said he'd like to lie down where the men lay, in the exact spot. He wants to be able to feel the real. I understand that sentiment. It's part of the reason we preserve these places. We want to touch the proverbial pieces of the true cross.

But in a larger sense, finding the site means nothing. The men are gone. The bodies have long since rotted. Either they were moved to the Soldier's National Cemetery when the bulk of the Federal dead were reburied in the winter of 1863-64, or they rest in an undiscovered and likely never to be found grave somewhere in the Pennsylvania topsoil.

The burial crew has found their own home in the earth as well. Finding the site will yield no evidence of what happened there. It will be a sterile farm field among other sterile farm fields. It is not a tangible reminder of anything in particular.

[The pictures themselves](#) hold the true power. Zoom in [on that photo](#). Zoom in really close. Download the TIFF version and hold onto your seat as you dive into the world of 1863. It's the wonder of the Library of Congress' massive scans of these images that makes them into true windows into the past.

The only thing matters is that moment, frozen in time forever by mercury or albumen. It doesn't matter where exactly that photo was taken. In fact, the photo draws some of its power from the very fact we don't know where it was taken. First, it means that the photo still holds sway in the imagination. It isn't simply a dopey scene to reenact for your Mom's camera as you jump from rock to rock in Devil's Den, only to rise up from the morbid spot and go back to the hotel room and watch a re-run of Law and Order before nodding off to sleep. Tourists lay down and pose, then do something these soldiers *never* could: they go home. And



This could be my Grand-Uncle.
Or your Grandfather. Or anyone's.

how many of them are reminded of that fact, as they hop back into the comfy, air-conditioned car? When we find the spot, it might simply become a carnival sideshow. While it's a mystery, there is still reverence.

The mystery also lends raw power to the men within the photo. When we know the place, we can begin to discern who the men actually were. We can make stabs at their regiment;, we can speculate as to which men from which



Feet that would never walk through
the door of their home again...

company might be that bearded face or this clenched fist. As long as the photo remains a mystery, the men captured in time are simultaneously no one and anyone. These handful of men stand in as visual reminders, the once-living sculptures who can be any young man who bled and died on these fields. They are an embodiment not of one man, but of every Federal soldier on the field at Gettysburg. Take away that universality, give them names and ranks and regiments, and they lose their deeper meaning and power as stand-ins for every dead United States soldier.

Where the photo was taken doesn't matter. But I guarantee that we'll keep spilling gallons of ink (both real and digital) over the matter for years to come. I have my own theory of where the photo is. I'm not going to say where. I haven't done nearly enough research or meditation to come out and say. It's irresponsible. I'm not going to say where I think Gardner's *Harvest of Death* series was captured.

In fact, if I discovered with 100% accuracy where that photo was taken, with all the surety available on this earth, I'm still not sure I would say where it was. I might hide the truth from the world and never tell another soul (beyond maybe Garry and Tim, after having sworn them to secrecy). *I hope we never find that place.* Because when that happens the photo may very well cease to matter. It will simply become a means to an end. It will be the treasure map to a giant red 'X' on the ground, discarded as soon as the shovels (or in this case modern cameras) are whipped out.

While the location is still a mystery, people still stare into those cold, lifeless, sorrowful and twisted faces. And that's the only reason the photos hold any meaning. They're the only reason it matters at all.

